



Intolerance towards minority ethnic communities: An overview of responses 2005-2013

Philip McDermott

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) has been gathering the opinions of its respondents on racial prejudice and ethnicity throughout the past decade. This particular Research Update takes stock of the responses that people have given during this period in order to ascertain changing trends. The past few years have been a critical juncture in the debates on race and immigration in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the most profound manifestation of this are the crime statistics which show that the number of reported racist incidents have increased from just 106 in 1998 to over 1,000 in 2010 (PSNI, 2013: 22). Despite a small decrease of such occurrences in 2011 and 2012, it appears that these are again on the increase. While the most recent figures showed a drop to less than 700 incidents in 2011/12, there were 750 recorded a year later (PSNI, 2013: 22).

Race relations issues have been raised further in the public consciousness with a number of events during 2014. In April, anonymous posters appeared on lampposts in some areas of Belfast claiming that locals were being denied job opportunities due to large numbers

of 'foreign' workers. For some politicians and community representatives the posters were seen as exacerbating tensions between immigrant and 'local' communities (BBC, 2014). This event was also illustrative of the already tenuous nature of relationships between sections of the host population and newcomers, particularly in light of socio-economic problems which have been exacerbated by the global recession.

The context of increasing diversity was further problematized in May when race and ethnicity issues became part of a row at the highest level of politics. A local Pastor, James McConnell, made public comments in which he branded Islam as "heathen" and "satanic". These were subsequently condemned widely (BBC, 2014). However, statements by Peter Robinson during the ensuing reaction were regarded by many as not going far enough to condemn outright the original remarks. Indeed in some quarters the First Minister's response was perceived as solidifying pre-ordained negative stereotypes of Muslims – a community which previous ARK reports have identified as one of the most marginalised

in Northern Ireland (See McDermott, 2013: 3). A conciliatory meeting by the First Minister with leaders of Northern Ireland's Muslim community was also well-publicised. Nonetheless this entire incident was reflective of wider concerns within society here with regard to cultural diversity. Therefore, it appears that this is a useful point at which to take a broad account of the responses from past and current Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT) includes a number of questions that are helpful in investigating trends during the past decade relating to intolerance shown towards minority groups. None of these questions alone can be claimed to measure 'prejudice' but looking at the some of these in combination helps us to understand various nuances in attitudes and how these have evolved. The first question asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement - In relation to colour and ethnicity, I prefer to stick with people of my own kind. Responses to this question are fairly stable over time but there are, however, clear differences

between the replies given by Protestants and Catholics with around 20% of Catholics agreeing with this statement since 2008 compared with about 30% of Protestants. There is little evidence of an upturn in agreement more recently.

A stable picture can also be seen in relation to self-reported prejudice. Respondents were asked if they would describe themselves as 'very' prejudiced against people of minority ethnic communities, 'a little prejudiced', or 'not prejudiced at all'. Again, Protestants are much more likely than Catholics to admit to prejudice.

However on this measure there is some evidence of a slight downturn in levels of self-reported prejudice in recent years. In a society which has been witnessing increasing diversity in the past few years the decrease in individuals reporting on their own prejudice is not surprising as the 'normalization' of diversity has perhaps meant that open expressions of tolerance are more socially desirable.

'Social distance' is another way of measuring attitudes towards 'other' groups which can be very helpful in understanding the nuances of intolerance.

NILT respondents were asked a series of questions about different minority ethnic communities. Here it was investigated if people would accept such minorities as tourists to Northern Ireland, as residents living and working here, as residents in your neighbourhood, as work colleagues, as a close friend or finally as a relative by marriage. In recent years there is a very marked drop in the acceptance of minority groups to this closest of ties – marrying into the family. As Figures 1 and 2 show, Catholics remain more accepting than Protestants but within both of these communities there is a sharp downturn in acceptance since 2010. Moreover, Irish Travellers and Muslims are clearly the least accepted group among both Protestant and Catholic respondents (this was dealt with in more detail in our previous Research Update on this topic). The results of these 'social distance' measures also seem to affirm the point made earlier that self-reported prejudice remains low for reasons of social desirability. However, the more indirect questions reveal wider patterns of segregation in a society where the idea of 'sticking with people of my own kind' may have become engrained in some quarters.

A further 'social distance' question asked participants to respond to the comment "would you accept various minority groups as a resident (living in a house) in my local area?". Respondents were given the option to answer in relation to Irish Travellers, Eastern Europeans, Muslims, and other minority groups. This is an important question in light of recent racist incidents which have often appeared to be concerned with the potential dilution of 'local' community identity that is perceived to come with immigration.

The results do show that there are again differences in responses from within the Protestant and Catholic communities. The major trends from Catholic respondents indicate that there was a decrease in

Figure 1: Catholics who would accept various minority groups as relative by marriage

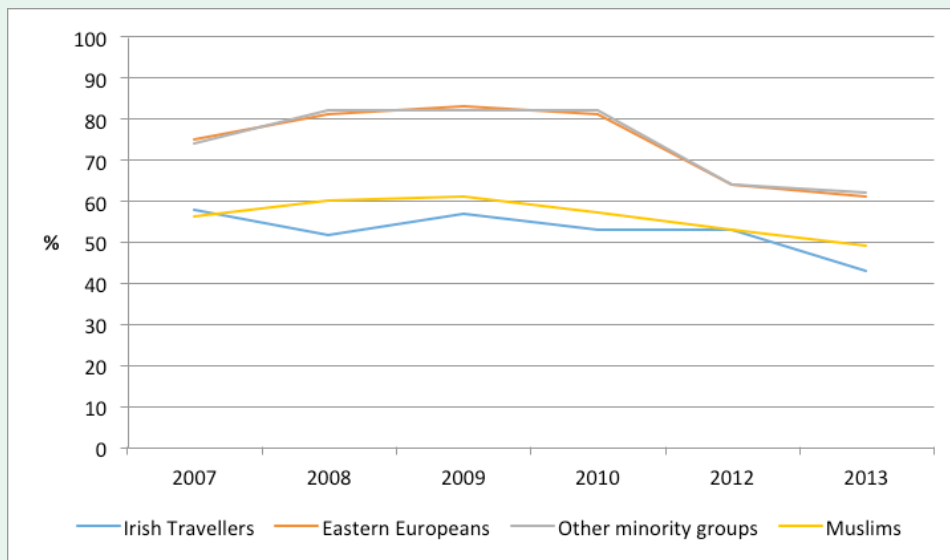


Figure 2: Protestants who would accept various minority groups as relative by marriage

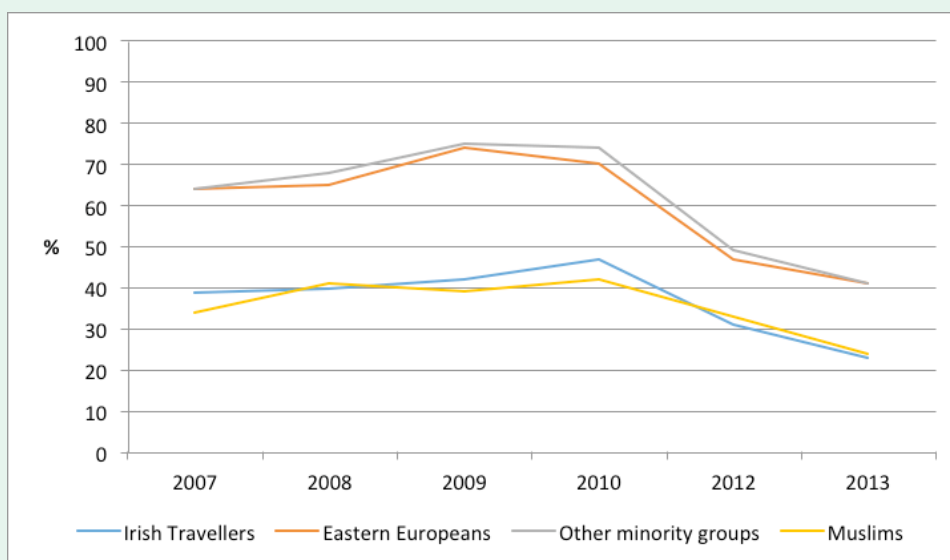


Figure 3: Protestants who would accept various minority groups as a resident (living in a house) in my local area

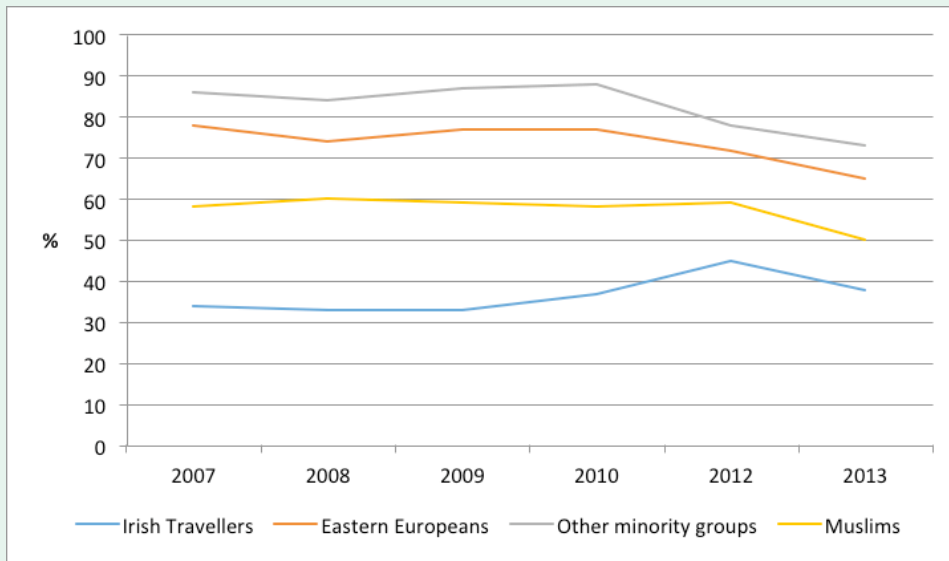
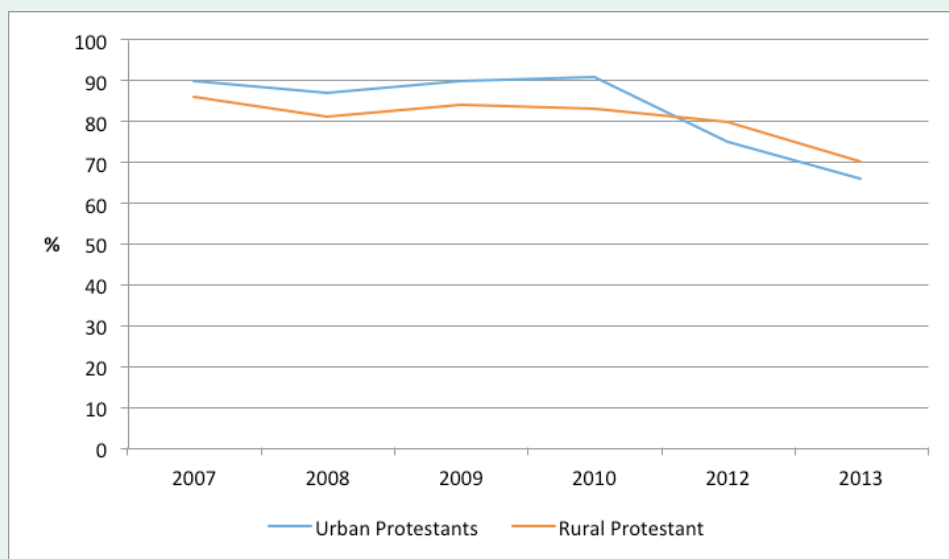


Figure 4: Urban/rural Protestants who would accept other minority groups as a resident in my local area



*Urban includes people who say that they live in 'a big city' or 'the outskirts of a big city'. Rural includes people who say that they live in 'a country village' or 'a farm or home in the country'.

acceptance of Irish Travellers between 2012 and 2013, this had been preceded by a period of steady increase in positive attitudes since 2007. The acceptance of Muslims by Catholics has been relatively consistent increasing from 72% in 2007 to 76% in 2013. Overall the acceptance of both Eastern Europeans and members of other ethnic communities has decreased slightly over time from 85% in 2007 to 80% in 2012. This suggests that increasing intolerance has not only been a feature in

the Protestant community.

Nonetheless, the acceptance of ethnic minorities and immigrant communities as neighbours remains much higher for Catholic respondents than for those from the Protestant community. Figure 3 indicates that Protestant acceptance of ethnic minorities as a neighbour has been lower across the four ethnic minority categories used by the NILT Survey. Moreover, acceptance of these groups

showed little improvement between 2007 and 2010, except in the case of Irish Travellers. However, there has since been a sharp decrease in acceptance in the past two years. This would indicate that whilst the need for race relations policies and implementation are required throughout Northern Ireland, it appears that the issue in Protestant areas is most acute.

Although intolerance towards ethnic minorities is clearly a feature within both communities, the suggestion that this is more prominent in Protestant urban areas is endorsed by the NILT findings. When asked the question 'would you accept other minority groups as a resident in my local area?', urban Protestants saw the most dramatic decline. While 90% answered 'yes' to this question in 2007, this had fallen to only 66% by 2013 – with the most marked decrease in the past two years. In the intervening period Protestants living in cities had also become less tolerant than their rural counterparts. It is significant that exactly the same trend also occurred for Catholics with those residing in cities becoming less accepting over time than those in the countryside. However, acceptance levels by Protestants have declined most radically during 2012 and 2013.

However, there are other variables to be taken into account. Take, for example, the current situation in Belfast where the results of the 2011 Northern Ireland Census show that some parts of the city which still have a predominantly 'Protestant' population have also witnessed the sharpest increase since 2001 of residents born in the countries which joined the European Union after 2004 – notably Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia (NISRA, 2011). This arguably increases contact with the Protestant community in the city and provides a different context of immigration and settlement than might be found in Catholic areas. This also questions assumptions

that increased levels of contact between individuals from different religious and ethnic backgrounds leads to improving levels of tolerance. It appears that the nature of contact between ethnic minorities and the host population at community level is a critical issue for policy-makers to engage with further. Therefore, while we might say with confidence that prejudice is more acutely articulated in Protestant areas, there has been evidence of a decline in tolerance in both communities.

Conclusion

Data on prejudice and intolerance from 2007 suggest that overall there has been a decline in acceptance of ethnic minority groups in Northern Ireland. The years after 2010 witnessed a particular drop in levels of acceptance which may very well have been driven by changing socio-economic factors, both globally and locally. Political instability and cultural insecurities may also have played their part but further research, both

quantitative and qualitative, is required to investigate these assumptions more fully. While levels of reported racist hate crime have fluctuated over the past number of years, the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey shows that levels of intolerance based on social distancing measures are on the increase. Indeed, this may very well correlate with actions of covert racism or even further fuel more overt forms of discrimination or racial attacks in the coming years.

References

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Key Points

- There have been fairly stable levels of self-reported prejudice from respondents. Protestants have been much more likely than Catholics to admit to prejudice in all NILT surveys from 2007 onwards.
- Social distance measures have revealed a less steady picture. When respondents were asked if they would accept an ethnic minority as a neighbour or as a member of their family (through marriage), the recent context has been a deteriorating one.
- Acceptance of ethnic minorities as neighbours was much higher for Catholic respondents than for those from the Protestant community although there was evidence of a downturn in acceptance in both communities in recent years.
- The acceptance levels of ethnic minorities had declined most rapidly in urban areas since 2010.

Philip McDermott is a lecturer in Sociology and member of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences at the University of Ulster. The module on attitudes to minority ethnic people was funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2012, 1204 adults were interviewed in their own homes. Fieldwork was carried out by Perceptive Insight. The survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster

Magee campus, University of Ulster
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 7137 5513 Fax: 028 7137 5510
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3034 Fax: 028 9097 3943
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk